

PRESENTATION
Before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Subcommittee on Health

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Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to come before this committee and for allowing me to participate in this important hearing. My name is Ignacio Leija and I am the Vice President of Service Operations for the American GI Forum National Veterans Outreach Program based in San Antonio, Texas.

It is my understanding that today's session focuses on transition and access between the Department of Defense and the VA medical facilities. This is truly a timely subject due to the 100,000 troops that are returning within 90 days. Obviously, due to the current situation within Iraq, things may change. Eventually, however, this transition will occur.

The American GI Forum constituency is made up of many Hispanic veterans. Many of our veterans reside in areas without reasonable access to VA medical centers. For that reason, I would like to take the opportunity to

voice our support for the continuing addition of VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics in areas lacking VA Medical Centers.

Our nation is faced with the homecoming of many more new veterans who will be returning soon, some of which may require long term medical care for illnesses or injuries suffered during this Iraqi war. For this reason, we support the recent introduction of collaboration between the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The result is that military medical evaluation findings can be accepted by the VA for ratings of medical conditions of newly discharged veterans without burdening them with other duplicating evaluations.

The American GI Forum also supports the initiative by the Department of Defense's Personnel Evaluation Boards that will consider the cases of disabled veterans who want to continue their military career. We encourage the continued sensitivity on the part of the Department of Defense to expand that opportunity for those veterans to cross-train to other fields and remain productive in the military in spite of a disability.

A great concern that the American GI Forum constituency has is that of releasing veterans immediately after returning stateside. The participation in a war zone can have long-term detrimental effects. It is our understanding that the Department of Defense plans to rotate reservists back from Iraq and

discharge them within 48 to 72 hours. The Vietnam experience, as supported by Vet Centers, should have taught us that combat participants must have time to defuse and adjust among their peers with similar experiences. We encourage the Department of Defense to further investigate and possibly consider a 30 to 45 day adjustment period before discharge during which time the Department of Defense and the Vet Centers could collaborate and offer appropriate counseling and other supportive services. If not, we fear that another cycle of posttraumatic stress disorders will follow this new generation of veterans.

Our organization and other VSOs are prepared to assist our returning veterans by joining transition teams that will facilitate the return and re-entry of new veterans into civilian life.

The American GI Forum is proud to serve the needs of all veterans through its National Veterans Outreach Program. With offices in six (6) of the larger cities in Texas, we currently provide services in employment and training for recently separated veterans, disabled veterans, and veterans that served in theaters of war. The staff assigned to these offices are prepared to assist veterans by providing them with job search skills, resume writing assistance, enrollment into short-term vocational classroom training, and on-the-job training with businesses that are ready to employ them.

In closing, I would like to thank Mr. Jose Coronado from the Audie Murphy Hospital here in San Antonio. We certainly feel very fortunate to have his leadership. I would personally like to thank him for his willingness to collaborate services with our newly formed Homeless Veterans Residential Center.

Finally, I would like to thank Congressman Ciro Rodriguez for inviting us to this very important session. The American GI Forum expects to continue to work with him for many years to come. Thank you.